

Vanilla

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1920 Fall New Orleans, Louisiana

Dress hiked up, hands balled up in bloody fists. Skin snagging; being cut and twisted on the brutal, untamed branches. Mama always told me to keep my hair pulled back and out of my face. I think that's what saved me. My bare feet are sliced on the rocks and sticks below. But the

blood rushing through my veins keeps me from feeling any pain, except the burning of my lungs and heart.

Freedom is what I always had and the idea of having to fight for it, like my great-grandmother did, burns my soul.

I hear the hounds on my trail. The vicious fire cutting towards me is unfazed by any obstacles nature puts in its path. Right behind them is the men. The white men, in all black. No, these ain't the KKK; these ain't even yo average racist. These are the hunters. The ones who catch free black women for fun. Rape'em, beat'em, hang'em, kill'em. They slaughter black women; with no consequences. And the man over it all is none other than my uncle, John.

Mary runs behind me, barely keeping pace. I know she gone get caught, but maybe she can make it if she gets to the swamp in time. They say if we make it there, we free. We can live. But if they catch us befo' we get there, kiss life goodbye. Mary is big and slow always has been. I wanna help her but I'm all Fifi got, I can't get caught.

A bang rings through the air, I look back at Mary. She got a big hole in her stomach. Blood start filling it up spreading across her white dress. Her eyes open wide in disbelief; soon enough rolling to the back of her head as she falls to the ground. And behind her is a white man with a smoking silver gun, Sam Wanger. The one I dread the most. The one I ain't want on my trail. Wasting no time, I continue towards the swamp, pushing with every inch of my body.

"Ain't that my pretty yella girl running. I'm'a get ya soon, Sweetheart!" Sam yells at me.

Like hell you will!

Chapter 1

July, 1920 Virginia

Jessie is my name given to me by my now deceased mother. As I walk up the steps to the rusted and financially deprived church; my brother, Jackson and sister, Fifi follow behind me. Dressed in black, faded as time tore it down like it never stood a chance; we had on the same tired clothes that we wore to our pop's funeral last year. Happy to see that bastard die. He was never anything good.

But, this time, it's mama. To see our mother pass due to health conditions wasn't as releasing as I thought it would be. It was expected; but nevertheless unwanted.

Our mother loved Jackson more; said he was gone take us out of financial ruin. It woulda' broke her cold heart to find out he liked men as much as she did, but that ain't got nothin' to do with me long as he knows Hell is hot. Be right down there with Pop. Mama too- she wasn't God's favorite.

Sittin' in the church, we try not to move too much cause we don't want splinters from the old wood benches. My mama's sisters sit on the opposite side, crying their hearts out for their younger sister. I don't know what crawled up their backs and possessed them to do such a thing. They barely liked my mama. Always talked bad of her for getting pregnant young. They never tried to reach out and help her. Just harm her.

The funeral lasted an hour or two. Can't really recall, but it ain't dampen my heart. Mama ain't really love me; just fed and clothed me cause she had to. She said I ruined her life. I wasn't supposed to be here this soon and if she could've gotten rid of me, she would have. I think it had more to do with her older sisters beating down on her and it just stuck with her.

Walking out the church it's like the world knew she passed. The sky was gray and sadden; not the best for walking, or thinking, or even praying.

I remember the church's pastor comin' up to me. I see how he looking. He noticed that my figure had filled out since my 19th birthday last year. Before that I was boyish and flat chested, no hips, no nothing. That's another reason mama ain't like me cause she said I looked like a nigger boy, but my light skin color might get me a husband if I try hard enough. Now, I look a lot like mama.

"Hey, young Jessie, don't you look good," Says Pastor Pressley

Pastor Pressley been known to touch on young girls, but mama kept me away. Says when she was my age, he used to touch on her but she ain't tell no one cause everyone would've blamed her. Saying it's her fault for wearing dresses that showed off her breasts. Well, come to think of it, that might be why I'm here. Word is some folks be saying that the Pastor and I kinda look alike. We do share similar features, but only God knows.

"Yes, Sir, thank you. If you'll excuse me, I got packin' to do." Cuttin' it short with him.

Jackson and Fifi walk away with me. It's a mile back to the house in our black hard leather bottom shoes. The rocks and gravel hurt more than the shoes themselves. Since I'm 19, Jackson 16, and Fifi 14, we could all take care of ourselves. Or so we thought. But Auntie Darly was making noises about taking us back to her home in Louisiana. Us three ain't know no better, but we got sense enough to know that Louisiana ain't nothing to look forward to.

Here in Virginia we lived a pretty good life. Mama was a seamstress so we always had clothes and Pops worked on the railroads. We hardly ever saw Pops but food was always on the table and we live in a big house. We all had our own bedrooms and even a room for my siblings and I to study after school. One thing about mama was that she wanted us to have a better

education than her and pops so she wouldn't let us do anything else but focus on school. Even with that though I would still help her sew clothes when she had a big order to fill by a certain date.

I wouldn't say we were one of the wealthiest families but we were well off in our community. Mama made dresses for the wealthy and they would always compliment her steady hands and creativity. Pops was the lead construction worker; he mostly managed everyone else but with the title came long hours.

Leather luggage, black with gold buttons, holds all the clothes we decided to bring to Louisiana. We had one outfit for each day of the week, and by next week the seven outfits would've been clean.

Aunt Darly sits outside waiting on us in her blue caddy. Way above her pay grade. Had to be my Uncle John that bought; some white man she married.

Loved his niggas.

Or at least loved her, but I think it's more of a lust thing.

My mama used to tell Darly about that.

Sooner or later she gone get caught up.

The white man used to have a white wife and Darly was his mistress. Soon after his wife died and my Aunt Darly had a big rock on her finger. Rumor is Darly killed off his wife to take her spot. She used to be one of the maids who worked in the house and suddenly the lady popped up dead and Darly popped up married. But then again that's just the story that runs through the family grapevine, who knows.

Jackson and Fifi sit in the back of the caddy, and I sit in the front across from Darly.

Jackson looks sickly green from motion sickness, and Fifi plays with the hem of her dress.

“Keep ya head straight Jackson- don’t be looking at no white girls,” Darly warns Jackson

“Oh, Auntie yeen gotta worry about that.” I tell her, hinting at Jackson’s likings.

“Julie you- “

“My name is Fifi.” My young sassy sister says from the back seat.

“Ya mama named you Julie so Imma call you Julie. You’re 14 now, so it’s time you get a job, you can work with me at the beauty shop. Imma teach ya what you need to know. Jessie you a grown woman now you needa get ya own togetha. Imma watch out for ya for a while, but you needa plan soon. Yo mama said yous smart so you can probably get a job down at the school.”

Darly tells us rules about how we will act in her house and how we will act in the public. Way different than how we live in the north.

“Don’t talk back to no cops, don’t even look they way that’s enough for them to kill ya. Don’t be tryna eat at no white restaurant -go to the colored side. When you see my husband out in public, don’t talk to him. You ain’t supposed to know him.”

“Well, how can we tell the difference between a white restaurant auntie?” Jackson asks

She looks at him through the rear-view mirror “It’ll look nice and fancy on the inside. All white walls and floors Now everything is different down here and I do not have a lot of time to be explainin’ it all- you just gone have to learn as you go and keep ya head down. Unless you wanna end up hangin’ fruit.”

I learned about that in school. They told us if you go to a restaurant with all white walls, looking like a fresh new building, it used to be a black owned business they burned down. Aunt Darly’s harsh reality of her explanation on how we are to live our lives puts knots in my stomach. It feels like I’m getting explained rules on a prison yard and if I step outta line it will be my last day on earth.

She keeps on talking and I just zone her out looking at the mesh of green as we drive closer to the house, letting my thoughts be consumed.

My mama got pregnant with me at 16.

I did the math myself because she would refuse to tell me.

It looked bad to be a single pregnant mother, so that’s where she met my soon to be step figa’, and Jackson and Fifi’s father. He was ‘bout three times her age, so I knew he wasn’t gone be alive too long sad to say.

Like any story he used to hit on my mama, and he tried whooping me, but he was too slow to catch me.

But I was an active kid you could say, so I deserved a few whoopings every now and then. But ain't no man finna beat on me.

To be honest with ya, I think my mama killed him.

It just makes sense cause I found him face down in his breakfast and mama's back was turned while she was cleaning dishes. I snuck passed so she never knew I saw him dead.

She told us he died in bed, sleep - but I knew otherwise. Jackson was three and Fifi was one, so they ain't have much of a connection with him.

He was dark-skinned and so was my mama, so both of my siblings are dark-skinned.

I don't know if my daddy was high yella or white. My mama wouldn't tell me. Alls she said was that he was no good. All I know is I got his eyes, hazel brown. My mama eyes too dark to be mines.

Auntie Darly turned off the road and about a mile up. I could see a three-story plantation looking house.

White columns, big ol' garden, the hanging tree, basically everything our ancestors ran from.

No cotton or suga on the lawn, just green grass for miles.

I betcha if John's great-grandfather saw us Nigras living up in his house he'd rise up from hell.

As we get closer, I see John and two high yella girls, my cousins Marissa and Maggie - they twins - and they both nine or eight, one of them ages. They got John green eyes so that'll take them a long way.

But their attitude, far from pretty.

Darly pulls the car to a hard stop. Not caring about the breaks stoppin' quick, my forehead hitting the dashboard. Making me question all decisions leadin' up to this point in life. She jumps out and runs up the steps with her arms open wide, greeting her sinful family.

“Come! Come! John, this is my baby sister's kids Jessie, Jackson and Julie I’m sorry, I meant *Fifi*. I forgot.” She says mockingly “John, I told them all the rules, so it should all go smoothly. Well, come on now. Time to get y’all settled in!”

“Why yes, I should hope so.” He hugs each one of us, but it felt like the hug he gave me was a little too personal, and I could see on Darly’s face she agreed. Her face turned up in distast, and she ushers us in the house putting her hand on the small of my back. “I will show yall to your rooms”

Our rooms are all right by each other. First was Fifi’s

Her room was pink and gold, the bed was quite large, and she wasted no time jumping into it.

Next was my room, gray and yellow. Two welcoming and warm colors if you ask me, and good for my age. I put my suitcase down at the door threshold and walk to Jackson's room with him.

His room was blue and black, but he and I both know he would’ve preferred the first room.

After making sure my siblings are ok, I go to my room and unpack laying everything out and putting it where it belongs. Removing the black dress I had on from earlier, I open the closet to find dresses already hanging- all to look like my size. Running my hand over the fabric, I still don’t feel at home in this white man's house but it'll have to do for now.

A knock on the door breaks me out of my trance.

“Uh just a minute! I grab the nearest thing to wrap around my body and it happened to be a throw blanket. I slightly open the door just enough to pop my head through. “Yes?”

Standing in front of me was a well-dressed man who looked to be young, around my age, with a suit fitted to his body. Back home, there was no such thing as a cute boy, just someone doable.

“Are you ok Miss?” He asks

“Yes, yes. And call me Jessie. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Mrs. Darly told me to inform you dinner will be ready at five. Hope you were able to... get comfortable.”

He gestures to my current clothing situation.

“Why yes and um I never got your name.” I respond.

“All of my friends call me Xavier. If you ever need anything Miss. Jessie, don't be shy.” He tilts his head down and walks away.

He seems nice. I'd like to get to know him and have someone my age to talk to.

Waltzing around a room till five was very difficult, tomorrow I will have to find something to preoccupy my time. The clock on the wall finally hits five, and I wasted no time leaving the dreadfully boring room.

Joining the rest of the “family” downstairs at the dinner table I pass Xavier.

“Hey, is there anything interesting to do around here? Sittin’ in that room for so long is unattractive and boring.”

“Yes Miss. Jessie. There’s a lake nearby, with a bench swing. I think you’ll find the view... attractive and entertaining.” A small smile plays on his lips. Making a joke out of my previous comment.

“Just Jessie and thank you. I’ll be look forward to that tomorrow.”

Dinner is far from what I expected. Sitting at the large brown wooden table decorated with a black tablecloth and red accessories, is with John sitting at the head. Snaking off with Marissa, Maggie on the left, Jackson, Fifi, and I on the right, lastly Darly sitting at the tail end of the table.

“Will Xavier be joining?” I ask.

Darly chuckles while drinking wine “Don’t be silly Jessie. We don’t eat with the help.”

“You used to be the help if you don’t recall.” I say poking at the vegetables on my plate.

Aunt Darly pulls a forced smile on her face. “Now Jessie, I invited you and yo siblings to my home. Act like yo mama gave you manners.”

“This ain’t yo home you stole it after you killed that white lady.”

“ I will not be disrespected in my house!”

“ And like I said! this aint yo house yous just masters favorite nig-”

Before I knew it, the wine glass was thrown my way barely missing me.

Standing up from the table I straighten my dress “Time to call it a night.”

Slamming the door letting everyone know just how irritated I am with being here in this congested ‘big house’. It's been about 2 hours before the house becomes silent only to be interrupted by the growling of my stomach. Taking note I didn't eat with everyone else earlier.

The path to the kitchen was pretty straight forward but finding something to eat wasn't as easy.

Settling on an apple to hold me over was all I could do for tonight.

The moon light shined through the window inviting me to come outside and I complied. Finding the smallest excuse to escape these cursed walls

The southern wind was still and heavy, not as strong as it was up north. It softly swayed the branches on the trees in its path.

Walking around the yard biting down on my apple I began to count the stars in the sky, constantly losing count. I find myself standing under a willow tree in awe by its branches but repulsed at the same time for their use. A breaking of a branch catches my attention and I snap my head to the left. In the distance by the forest line is a girl. A girl in an all white dress. She doesn't make a move, almost like a statue. She doesn't say a word, just stares in my direction. I try to walk towards her and a blood curdling cry rings from her mouth as if she saw something that was after her. She darts off, running deep in the forest. Her white dress begins to fade in with the darkness the further she goes.

“Wait! Wait!” I try to catch up with her but she is far to gone for me to find her.

Ultimately giving up - chest heaving trying to collect myself, I turn around to go back to the house. Before I could take a step, the sight in front of me causes me to fall back on the ground. Every tree branch in the willow tree is a woman swinging ever so softly. All wearing white dresses. Their eyes rolled in the back of their heads. Some were covered in blood dripping down to the ground. Some look like they were set on fire. Bodies charred unrecognizable to who they once were. Some old, other young, but they all seemed to experience the same pain and agony. They all began shouting at me “RUN! RUN! RUN!!!!”

Hopping up on my feet I take off back into the house. Skipping steps I make it to my room in no time closing and locking the door. My breath is even more sporadic than before. I don't know what I saw. I don't know if I am imagining things, but I'm not taking it lightly.

‘Jessie get yo high yella ass in here and wash yo brotha’ and sista’ clothes. How they gone have clean clothes for school tomorra’ if you don’t wash them? You so lazy and think you privileged because you light-skinned. You 12 year old now start acting grown.’

Whenever my ma drank, this is how she would act. I didn't pay her no mind because in the next five hours she would be back to normal.

Warm water splashes on my dress as I drag the heavy wash bucket outside and down the porch steps. I drop a bar of soap in the water and scrub all the stains out of my siblings' clothes.

Waking up in the soft fluffy bed, the dream from a past memory begins to fade out of my mind. The morning light slips through the windows and covers the floorboards. I opened the window last night to let cool air in and the white curtains play in the wind. I grab a dress out the wardrobe and make my way to the bathroom. Today I am supposed to go to the lake, but I have to find Xavier, because I don't know where it is.

Maybe I'll see that girl from last night.

This dress is baby blue with a flower stitched on the left side of my chest.

My hair is pulled back into a bun, with single curls falling around my face.

Upon opening the door, I smell morning breakfast.

Back up north as soon as I became old enough, I was the one cooking for the family. So, it's a relaxing feeling to not have to wake up early and cook for everyone.

This nice woman named Perry walks down the hall towards my direction carrying fresh linens.

Perry is a short, heavy set woman. Her hair is pulled back into a neat bun; black and littler with gray at the roots. She wears a black dress with a white apron and sensible leather shoes.

"Good Morning, Perry. Have you seen Xavier?"

Her aged eyes crinkle at the corners “Goodmorin darling. Yes, he is outside working on Mrs. Darly’s Caddy. I promise that lady can’t drive.” I see her face turn sour when she mentions my aunt, and I completely understand.

“Perry, can I ask you something?”

“Anything sweetheart.”

“What do you think of Darly?”

She speaks so fluently as if she's been holding this on the tip of her tongue for years.

“She turned on her own people. Treats her own color like the help. She pretends to be something she ain’t and hides her guilt and shame behind expensive things. But it’ll catch up to her one day. God’s gonna make sure of that.”

I nod in agreement “What do you think about my siblings and I? Honest answer.”

She looks at me and places her hand on my shoulder. “I wish you were my children so I can show you what it's like to be loved.”

I return a small smile and thank her for giving me some of her time.

The July heat hits my face as soon as I open the front door.

Scanning the front yard I look for Xavier, and I see him about 100 yards to my left, under the Caddy.

The earth beneath my feet switches from soft grass to hard gravel and my presence is known.

“I’m almost done Mrs. Darly. I promise it’ll be ready so you can go to town. Just give me 30 more minutes.”

“I’m most definitely not Darly. Thats the worst i” I say laughingly

Xavier pushes himself from under the car and shields his eyes from the sun to look up at me towering over him. The most beautiful smile comes over his face, the straightest teeth. He has a small patch of oil on his face and his eyes are bright.

“Well good morning Miss. Jessie.”

“It's just Jessie, remember?”

“Yes but ‘Miss. Jessie fits you so well.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, I came out here to see if you can show me to that lake you were talking about yesterday.” This entire time I’m smiling, along with his presence, the warm sun is welcoming.

“Yes, I’d be happy to, as soon as I finish this - it won’t take me long,” He says crawling back under the car.

“Ok, I’ll wait out on the porch.”

Four rocking chairs, two benches, four flowerpots - perfectly placed decorating - the larger front porch. And don’t forget the slave columns, can’t forget about those.

Personally, I have no problem with people outside of my race - we are all people. Some people just made terrible decisions, and now it has a domino effect that’s permanently tattooed on our timeline.

I play with my makeshift straw dolls outside in the tall grass.

“Why hello Miss Janet, would you like to go to the Gold Ball with me?” I speak for the boy doll as he speaks to the girl doll, Miss Janet.

“Oh why Mr. Garrett I’d love to go to the Ball with you” Says Miss Janet.

“Jessie! Come up here and say hey to Uncle Eddy!”

Uncle Eddy? I don’t know no Uncle Eddy.

Turning to look at them, my mom was sitting deep in a rocking chair and a dark skinned man was hovering over her with one hand pressed against the house holding his body weight.

Picking up my dolls I run to the house to get a better look at this man named Eddy.

Their eyes follow me until I reach the porch steps.

He crouches down to be eye level with me. He was really tall.

“Hey baby girl. How old are you?”

Hugging my dolls close to me I look back at my ma to make sure its ok to answer him and she gives me a nod

“I’m three mister” I’m not scared of him, so I look him in his eyes to talk.

“Three? That’s nice then. You got all that long pretty hair.”

The way he talks makes me feel uncomfortable.

“How tall are you?” I ask

“I’m 6 feet tall, baby girl.”

“My name is Jessie.”

“Jessie don’t be getting smart with grown folks now, gone go in the house and go eat get ready befo’ bed.” My ma tells me.

“Is he not done with this damn car yet? Imma be late to town by time he gets done.” Darly says as she busts through the front door with a cigarette hanging from her lips. Her choice of clothing today is far too extravagant to match her bland personality. Her yellow tented eyes catch me rocking back and forth in the rocking chair. I see disgust written on her face and I can’t help but feel entertained. Not able to stand my presence any longer she marches down to Xavier.

They have a little back and forth and I guess Darly decided on her own the car was ready, so she gets in and drives off like she is in a speed racing tournament.

Xavier shrugs his shoulders and looks back at me yelling from afar “Well, are you ready Miss Jessie?”

We walked for 10 minutes.

“How far is the lake?” I ask fiddling with a piece of straw hay I picked up at the beginning of our journey.

“I’d say about 5 more minutes. What? Are you bored of my presence already?” He jokes lightly throwing rocks off into the trees.

“Heavens no! You seem to be my only shot of entertainment. Xavier, tell me about yourself.”

“Um well I’m 20 years old. I was born and raised here in south Louisiana. My ma passed away when I was fourteen and I met Mrs.Perry in town. I was selling newspapers, just to make ends meet and she took me in. Helped me get a job on this plantation fixing up stuff around the house and carrying heavy stuff John didn’t wanna lift. I’ve been working here ever since. Ms.Perry and I don’t live here on the plantation. We take housing in the city - in the black areas that is.”

I think about his back story and remember every detail “Can I ask how she passed?”

“She was really sick and caught some flu I guess. Not sure but doctors were too expensive for her to go find out. I just felt bad ya know? Cause there was nothing I could do. I didn’t even want to be in the house hearing her in pain, but I stayed by her side as much as I could. Until one day she just didn’t wake up.”

“Yeah, I understand the same thing kind of happened with my ma, but I don’t think I was as close with mine as you seem to be with yours.”

The silence between us was comfortable. I just watched the scenery that passed us by.

We reached the large, twisted tree with a bench swing hanging from a limb, and the lake was clear with moss wrapped around the outskirts.

“Xavier? Is there another girl on the plantation?”

“Miss.Jessie is this your way of asking me if I’m interested in someone else?” he cracks a sly smile

“Oh no I saw a girl last night by the forest line who had on a white dress.”

He sits and thinks for a minute “No can’t be. No one else lives here.”

“Oh ok” then who was the girl I saw? And what was she terrified of?

Xavier and I talk for the next three hours till it’s almost nearing dinner.

“Miss Jessie I was wondering if maybe one of these days you’d come to town with me. There are these parties we throw to remind everyone we are family.”

The thought of getting off this plantation and experiencing the fun side of what Lousisana has to offer was too good to pass up. “Yes Xavier I’d like that very much.”

The sun began to hide behind the hills. We started our journey, heading back the same way we came.

Chapter 2

August 1920

“Jessie! Come on down here and help me set up breakfast, befo; yo siblings and cousins get up.”

I came down the white wooden stairs covered with a red thick carpet, it mutes the steps of my black leather shoes. Uncle John bought me these new shoes when we first got here, day after the incident with the wine glass or what not.

Aunt Darly and I never officially apologized, we just sort of started back talking one day. But if there is ever a show of loyalty, I don't count on her for anything.

Today is my first day at my teaching job down at this negro school called McDonogh, deep in the south side of town. In a show of good faith, I wore my favorite dress - a deep pigmented yellow dress with black flowers on it. It has black buttons from the middle of my waist all the way up to the bottom of my neck. It hugs my torso and flares out at the bottom, and the hem stops at my ankles. The sleeves stop at my elbow, and it makes me feel comfortable. My long dark hair is down to my back with a yellow flower pin in it to keep it out my face.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs I enter the kitchen and see Aunt Darly running around frantically to get the table set. I grab the plates and silverware and place it out on the table. I ain't

had to cook since I got here so I just deal with everything else, making the table look nice So we can all play pretend. If I'm completely honest I don't think Darly can cook, she probably got this whole little scheme of having Perry cook and she says she did it.

"Jessie how you feelin? Ready to start yo new job?" I know her question wasn't phrased as her caring about me, what she really wanted to say was *when you plan on getting up out of here*.

"Um I guess I'm ready. I like kids and I can't wait to help them. Do you know anyone at that school since the twins go there?"

"Yeah, I know the twin's teachers, that's about it. You gone be working with the bigger kids, the 14-17-year-olds stuff like that. I do however know there is a teacher over there Mr. Adams - he one fine son of a gun - but I don't want you getting caught up in that, just make some money maybe one day you can get a place of your own. I ain't rushing you or kicking you out I just think you grown that's all."

I listen to everything she said while putting napkins on the table. Aunt Darly she always been men crazy, Uncle John handsome for his age and got money. Aunt Darly always been insecure and feels threatened by me being here. But I don't want Uncle John - he too old. I'm just happy to be here. My mama even told me that's how Darly was growing up, boy crazy and jealous. I'm surprised she didn't end up pregnant when she was younger.

I know Uncle John like me tho, he bought me more clothes than my siblings and gave me the bigger bedroom. Even though I see these signs, I aint really caring as long as he doesn't touch me.

The big ol' grandfather clock in the hallway goes off 5 times saying its 5 O'clock. On que my siblings, cousins, and Uncle John all come down the stairs in a rush. Aunt Darly throws the last bit of pancakes on the plates, dusts off her apron and stands at the end of the table with a big smile on her face. Knowing dog-on well she aint cook none of this. I take a seat in my usual spot and everyone else fills in the empty spots at the table.

"Fifi, you coming to the beauty shop today with me. Imma teach you how to perm hair," Aunt Darly demands while we all eat.

I look at Darly's hair.... She's gone teach Fifi to perm hair? Don't look like she can do her own. It ain't been much Darly was good at except spreading her-

"And Jackson go down to the market and get some potatoes for tonight's dinner" Darly cuts my thoughts off.

After about 30 minutes of everyone eating, I get up and clean my plate in the sink and straighten my clothes. "Ok I'll see y'all tonight."

I catch three buses to get to the school, and I walk the rest of the way. By 6:30, I make it to the front doors of the school, with 30 minutes to spare.

Approaching the main office, I get my information and where I will be working.

"Well, ain't you just a pretty high yella girl!" This lady at the front desk says. I read her name tag, it says "Mary." She smiles, and her dark eyes, defined with age, crinkle at the corners.

I laugh lightly “Uh yes ma’am I suppose so.”

“How old are you honey?” She peeks over her glasses looking at me, pecking away at a typewriter.

Adjusting my bag strap on my shoulder, “my birthday was two weeks ago so I’m 20 now.”

“Oh well, in that case Happy Birthday! Well, you are welcome here honey. Go down the hall, to your left that’s the upper kids’ hall. We gone start you off as a teacher’s aid in room 101, let you learn a bit, and soon we gone give you yo own classroom. We could use more teachers so if you know anyone, don’t be shy.”

“Thank you.” I pull my bag higher on my shoulder and walk down the hall towards the room she told me about.

The halls look so dead and unpainted, and whatever paint is on there is chippin’ off.

Though it was little to no help, I chip some of the paint off to release stress.

If I’m still here long enough, Imma bring some life into this place.

I knock on the door and look through the small window. There is a teacher in there setting up the classroom for the day to start.

His head lifts and looks in my direction as he ushers by hand to come inside.

“I’m sorry you are early. Class doesn’t start for another 30 minutes. You are more than welcome to wait in the hallway, until the rest of the students get here.” He doesn’t make eye contact with me, instead he continues sorting papers.

Remembering my setting, I began to talk about how I was raised.

My mama told me you gotta have two different ways of talkin’: in the house and in your head you can talk how you want to, but when you go out in public or around them white folks make sure you sound like you are somebody.

“I’m sorry, I am not a student.”

He looks up at me and makes a deeper observation.

“Are you the new teacher aid?”

I shift back and forth

“Why yes I am. I’m sorry but what class is this? Ms. Mary didn’t say, she just told me what room.”

“I teach English, and your name is?” He asks while shuffling papers in his hands.

I look around at his classroom and just like the rest of the school, it has little to no color.

“My name is Jessie, I guess you can call me Miss. Jessie. Excuse me if this is too forward, but do you mind if I decorate your classroom one of these days? It’s just so dull... no life. Back up north I decorated a classroom. It made learning fun for the students.”

A ghostly smile came onto his face. “I’d like to help you.”

“Mmm, I doubt it,” I say to him

Perfectly white teeth flash through a smile “Why do you think that?”

“If you wanted to decorate your classroom you would’ve done it.”

“Well, maybe I never had a beautiful woman to help me.”

“You tryna be slick Mr. Adams but we will see.”

“How do you know my name?” He asks

“Well, I might’ve heard a thing or two about you.” I smirk.

After what felt like hours of talking back and forth the bell rang and students started creating noise through the hallways.

I find a spot in the front of the class getting ready to introduce myself to the class when they arrive.

“Hey Mr. A!” a male student says entering the classroom, as a line of 12 more students follow him. I look around the room. Only 13 students “Excuse me Mr. Adams, is this all of the class?” I ask

“Unfortunately, yes here, down south, school ain't the go to.”

I nod in understanding, the tardy bell rings shortly after.

All the students look at me from the bottom up.

“Class, this is Miss. Jessie. She will be assisting in class with whatever questions you have. Miss. Jessie care to introduce yourself?”

“Uh yes hello. As you know I’m Miss.Jessie. I’m from Virginia so it’s a little different down here for me but I am learning. Like Mr. Adams said, I am here to help you so please ask any questions.”

A girl in the middle of the class raises her hand and Mr. Adams points to her, giving her permission to talk.

“I wish I could be as pretty as Miss. Jessie,” she says. Her dark-skinned complexion is golden and rich. Her eyes are dark brown, and her hair is slicked back in a bun.

I walk towards her and kneel in front of her “Sweetie what is your name?”

“Melonie.”

“Well Melonie, I wish I could be as beautiful as you. Your skin color wears the stories of all our ancestors. The waves in your hair carry the reflections of our paths to freedom. I have a sister your age and she looks just like you. Every day I remind her she is beautiful, and no one can take that from her. Take pride in it and love yourself as much as God loves you.” I offer a small smile

Without hesitation, she wraps her very thin arms around me. “Stay for a while Miss.Jessie.”

“I will. I promise.”

Class resumes and students ask me questions all throughout the lessons.

Some make sense and some don't.

Some are about my personal life, and others are about the lesson.

I think they just want to talk to me which is ok I don't mind.

The bell rings after a few hours, signaling its lunch time. The class leaves, some grab lunch bags from their backpacks.

“Miss. Jessie, if you'd like you can join the rest of the teachers in the break room,” Mr. Adams offers.

“Thank you, I will tomorrow. It's a beautiful day outside. I will eat out there.”

Taking my bag, I exit the way I came through the front of the school.

Scanning the lawn, I find a nice shaded tree under which to eat. I see young Melonie sitting under a tree picking at her off white dress, eyes looking faded away into her mind. Walking in her direction, I catch her attention and she looks up my way with a big smile.

Scooting over to make room for me, she pats her little hand on the ground.

“Where's your lunch Melonie?” I ask as I try to sit down as elegantly as possible.

“Oh, we ain't got money like that to do lunch. Mama said just try to wait till dinner and I'll be ok. So that's what I do.”

“Well, would you like to share my lunch?” I ask her and she nods almost immediately. “Ok so, I got two sandwiches, an apple, and a pear. What would you like?”

She thinks for a while. “I’ll take the pear because I never had one before; and a sandwich.”

I hand her what she asked for. She bit into the pear first; her eyes lit up. “Oh, my Miss. Jessie, this is so good! Can you bring me one tomorrow too, ya know, if you don’t mind?”

I pull her in for a hug. “Of course I can bring you one tomorrow.”

Melonie and I finish our lunch and walk back to class together finishing off the rest of the day.

I stay behind to help Mr. Adams cleanup the classroom.

“You are a natural with the kids. Melonie seems to like you a lot,” he says.

“Oh yes, I don’t know where it came from, I guess I just know how to do it. Do you know Melonie’s home situation? I don’t mean to pry, but I feel like there is more than meets the eye.”

He continues to straighten up his desk “I’m not sure her parents never come to the open houses, and she is relatively new. If you want, you can handle the home visits. Just pick a few students a day and visit them at home to let their parents know you are here for them. But ya know we only got 13 students, so really you can see them all in one day- but that’s up to you and your schedule.”

“Oh, ok. Yes, I can handle that.”

Around three o’clock we cut off the classroom lights and leave the building.

“How are you getting home Miss. Jessie?”

“I rode the buses here, so I will ride them back.”

“How about I drop you off. That is a lot of bus fare adding up over the year.”

“Hmm... ok. You can drop me off in the afternoon, but I will ride the buses in the morning.”

“Yes ma’am.” he tilts his head at me and opens the passenger door to his car.

“So, Miss. Jessie what brings you down south?”

“My mama and pa died, and my aunt took my siblings and me in. We were fine up north but my siblings need more than just me.”

“Why do you think that?” He asks with his eyes focused on the road.

“Well, it’s certain things I can’t teach them. I can only do so much, and they been sheltered so they don’t know too much about how to live in this world. And not to mention my siblings and I aint the same skin color, so we were treated differently. So, what about you? Tell me about your life.”

I can see in his eyes he is looking where to start. Looking for the part of his timeline that is important. “Well, I was always raised down here, and I went to school. My mom was one of the teachers, so I was constantly learning at home and at school. She told me ‘A nigga with no education aint gone know how to beat the white man.’ So that’s what I do I learn, and I teach others what they need to know.”

“That’s nice, but I feel like you are leaving out some details.” I say, bluntly.

He just laughs. “Well I gotta leave you wanting more, don’t I?”

“You might just be right, Mr. Adams.”

After ten minutes of silence, we came to the house. “You can drop me off right here. I will walk the rest of the way. Thank you, I really appreciate it.”

He pulls the car to a halt, and I get out, securing my bag.

“See you tomorrow, Miss.Jessie.”

“Lookin’ forward to it, Mr. Adams.”

“Call me Noah.” He winks at me

“And it’s still Miss. Jessie to you.” I offer a small smile and walk up the gravel road towards the house.